University of Michigan ends all COVID-19 protection measures as Fall semester begins

International Youth and Students for Social Equality at University of Michigan
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This week, as tens of thousands of students are returning to the University of Michigan (U-M) campus for the new school year, the university administration has moved to eliminate almost all remaining COVID-19 measures.

On August 18, an all-campus email sent from the university's chief health officer, Robert Ernst, stressed that "in many ways the response to COVID-19 has shifted to individual risk assessment and adoption of vaccination, testing, masking, and interaction with others (including travel) that align with that individual risk."

In other words, with the COVID-19 virus still spreading unchecked and infecting 90,000 people around the country every day, the university has announced, despite an ongoing public health catastrophe, that it will no longer take measures necessary to ensure the health and safety of its 48,000 students, tens of thousands of employees and faculty, and the community at large.

The on-campus testing program has been stripped down to almost nothing. Over the summer, only students who are exempted from vaccination or not up-to-date with boosters were required to test weekly. Effective this Monday, all participation in asymptomatic testing is voluntary.

The gutting of the remaining testing and tracking program will assist the university administration in covering up the coming upsurge of infections.

In line with a national campaign spearheaded by the Biden administration, mask mandates were lifted first in all areas outside of classrooms and hospitals in March, and in May were completely removed from the campus except for patient care areas.

After hypocritically stating that instructors "are encouraged to remind individuals of actions each can take, like masking…," the August 18 all-campus email quickly asserted that the COVID-19 risk level for the county is "medium" and only immunocompromised or high-risk populations are recommended to wear masks.

Under official university policy, students are still encouraged to "stay home if they are sick, with support from their supervisors and instructors." At the same time, faculty members received messages stating that they need to re-establish norms for classroom engagement, hinting that instructors should keep students in the classroom as much as possible.

U-M is also removing most of its quarantine infrastructure. University policy explicitly states that "all students should have individual plans for isolation" if they contract COVID, and only a very limited number of quarantine housing spaces will remain for students who live in dorms.

Even before the university stopped providing quarantine housing to the broader student body, many students, including those sharing rooms in the dorms, complained during the Omicron wave at the beginning of the year that it took days for them to be transferred to an isolated living space after testing positive. This disastrous situation will almost certainly reemerge in the coming weeks.

Consequences of the lack of COVID-19 measures have already been felt around the campus. Before classes commenced, the U-M (Ann Arbor) COVID-19 dashboard had already recorded 200 cases in a week. Nearly a fifth of the already very limited on-campus isolation housing spaces for quarantining students remain occupied.

Furthermore, the CDC's transmission level for the county is now labeled "high," not "medium" as stated in the all-campus email. In addition, wastewater testing is revealing very high positivity levels. With no

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effective testing infrastructure, these figures are likely a vast undercount.

Students and faculty have taken to social media to alert others of the spread already underway. On Twitter, Ryan Glauser, a History Ph.D. candidate at U-M, tweeted, “0 days of teaching and UM already is canceling some classes due to COVID for the THIRD year in a row.”

U-M is not alone in pursuing such criminal policies. In line with its disastrously inadequate “vaccine only” policy, the Biden administration has worked systematically to dismantle the limited regulations put in place to contain the spread of the virus, ending social distancing, testing and mask mandates in recent months. On Monday, the Biden administration cut off delivery of free testing kits and ended free testing at schools, shelters and prisons.

In contradiction to the propaganda of the ruling class that COVID has turned “mild,” at present about 500 people in the US are dying from the virus every day. Over the past month, weekly COVID deaths around the world have amounted to 15,000, according to the World Health Organization, while estimated excess deaths have run five to six times higher. Even among those who have “recovered” from the infection, over 20 million Americans have Long COVID. It is estimated that between 2 million and 4 million people are out of work due to Long COVID symptoms.

The University of Michigan has 48,000 students, including students coming from across the United States and internationally, nearly 30,000 staff and 6,200 Michigan Medicine nurses. With COVID-19 raging across the US and internationally alongside a swiftly developing monkeypox pandemic and the reemergence of polio, U-M’s lecture halls, dorms, apartments, sports stadiums, offices, and other public spaces will become human petri dishes for mass infection.

This dangerous and reckless reopening of the school must be opposed!

But to whom should the students turn? The U-M Board of Regents is made up of powerful individuals representing Wall Street, the Pentagon, financial, real estate and health insurance interests. Six of the eight members of the Board of Regents are affiliated with the Democratic Party, which controls the Michigan statehouse, the White House and US Congress, and is overseeing the social catastrophe of mass death and infection.

The university administration shut down the strike by graduate instructors and workers in September 2020 through a court injunction, threatening legal retaliation against students striking for a safer teaching environment and more protection from COVID.

The struggle for health and safety can be won only by turning to the working class. The homicidal policies of the ruling class are rooted in the nature of capitalism, which prioritizes corporate profit above human life. Without putting an end to the profit system and reorganizing society on the basis of human need through the revolutionary intervention of the working class, the pandemic will continue.

The struggle of students for a safe studying and living environment cannot be separated from the struggles of workers against exploitation, wage-cutting, forced overtime and deadly conditions in the workplace.

At U-M itself, 6,200 nurses at Michigan Medicine are voting to authorize a strike against intolerable working conditions, including inadequate staffing that undermines the health and safety of nurses and patients alike. The hospital has made it clear that it does not intend to address this issue. With the assistance of the pro-corporate Michigan Nurses Association (MNA) and its local affiliate, the University of Michigan Professional Nurse Council (UMPNC), it has kept the nurses working without a contract for two months.

Students who are seriously concerned about their health and safety as the school year begins must understand that their fight is not separate from, but rather bound up with that of the nurses. We urge students to support the nurses’ struggle at Michigan Medicine, help mobilize the broadest support across the state and nationally, and take up the fight for a socialist society in which human need, not private profit, determines the production and distribution of the goods produced by the working class.

Join the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, the youth arm of the Socialist Equality Party!

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